

# after you

ROB FAZIO LOST HIS DAD IN THE 9/11 WORLD TRADE CENTER ATTACKS. NOW HE'S WORKING TO MAKE SURE HIS FATHER'S LAST, SELFLESS ACT CONTINUES TO HELP OTHERS.

By Maureen Harmon '00 Behrend

PHOTO BY BILL CRAMER

RON FAZIO KNEW THE PLANE WAS FLYING too low. He could see it approaching the World Trade Center from his office on the 99th floor of the South Tower. When it got close enough, he and his coworkers could make out the dashboard of the cockpit, the American Airlines logo on the plane's tail, and the fact that every window shutter was drawn closed. "It's going to hit us," Fazio yelled.

He was wrong. The plane slammed into the other tower, the North Tower, at 8:46 a.m. on September 11, 2001, engulfing floors 93 through 99 and leaving Fazio and his workmates scrambling to get away from the windows as debris from the plane and the building battered the glass of the South Tower. Within seconds, Fazio and the rest of the workers at Aon Reinsurance could smell the smoke and feel the heat of the fire fueled by 10,000 gallons of jet fuel.

Fazio didn't waste any time evacuating employees. "We gotta go now," he told them,

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and held the door as his coworkers fled to the stairwell. "One man was telling [Fazio] to relax," recalls Connie Labetti, another Aon employee. "That guy didn't make it down."

Fazio made the rounds on the 99th floor, trying his best to convince everyone to evacuate before beginning the stairway descent himself. Once he reached the Sky lobby on the 78th, Fazio, a large man with heart problems, opted for an elevator and made the rest of the trip to the ground and out of the building. Based on cell phone records, the Fazio family knows that he lent his phone to a man to call his wife. That woman later thanked the Fazio family—it turned out to be the last time she told her husband she loved him.

Fazio apparently never crossed Liberty Street to get clear of the building, instead staying behind to continue helping. Around 9:00 a.m., while he was talking on the phone to his wife, the phone went dead. The family's best guess is that he was killed by debris as the second plane slammed into the South Tower. Fazio's remains were never recovered. All the family has received is a piece of his credit card, found at Ground Zero and sent to them by the New York City medical examiner's office.

In the days following the attack, when family and friends were combing the city looking for loved ones who were in the towers that day, **Rob Fazio '96 Lib**, Ron's son, and the rest of the family were piecing together Ron's final moments by talking to his coworkers at Aon—the ones he convinced to leave the South Tower immediately after the first plane struck. When most of them recalled the last time they had seen Ron, they kept repeating the same thing: "He was holding the door."

In Ron's memory, his family started Hold the Door for Others, a non-

profit support group, in the summer of 2002. "I had a country grieve with me when I lost my dad," Rob says. "For others, support ends after the funeral." Hold the Door is aimed at helping people prepare for, live with, and eventually grow through loss and adversity by providing online resources like workbooks dealing with grief, interactive CD-ROMs, and journals—all offering practical advice on facing the death of a loved one or another life challenge, and all free of charge on the organization's Web site ([www.holdthedoor.com](http://www.holdthedoor.com)). The

group also connects the grieving to speakers, psychologists, and people facing similar losses through workshops at an annual Hold the Door Day; this year's is scheduled for Oct. 20.

Though the events of Sept. 11 are what got Hold the Door started, Rob, a psychologist and president of the organization, explains that it's not aimed specifically at 9/11 families. Last summer, for example, Rob traveled to New Orleans to teach students affected by Hurricane Katrina how to help other children facing loss, and more recently, he and other members of Hold the Door traveled to Virginia Tech to support the students affected by the shootings there. Still others are accessing Hold the Door's resources to cope with the loss of a mother or father who has died of natural causes, the loss of a child to illness, or even the loss of their own everyday lives as they face a personal trauma like cancer.

Rob Fazio is the leading example of Hold the Door's pay-it-forward principle. Losing his dad on Sept. 11 helped him reach out to others: Just as Ron held the door for his coworkers at Aon, Rob plans to follow in his father's footsteps, and hopes others will do the same.

## "HOLD THE DOOR" AIMS TO HELP PEOPLE DEAL WITH GRIEF—WHETHER IN NEW ORLEANS AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA, AT VIRGINIA TECH, OR IN A FAMILY WHERE SOMEONE HAS A LIFE-THREATENING ILLNESS.



When survivors of the World Trade Center attacks recalled the last time they saw Ron Fazio that day, most said the same thing: "He was holding the door."

September/October 2007